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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CANBERRA 000535

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [AS](#)
SUBJECT: PM RUDD NAMES JOHN FAULKNER NEW DEFENSE MINISTER

REF: CANBERRA 524

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Classified By: Political Counselor James F. Cole. Reasons: 1.4 (b)(d).

SUMMARY

11. (C/NF) Prime Minister Rudd named Special Minister of State and Cabinet Secretary Senator John Faulkner as Defence Minister on June 5, replacing Joel Fitzgibbon, who had stepped down the previous day (reftel.) Faulkner, 55, is known for his toughness, integrity and attention to detail. Although from the Left wing of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), Faulkner is a pragmatist who is trusted by Rudd and held in high regard across the ALP. Faulkner was one of only a handful of Labor MPs to have had previous ministerial experience when the ALP returned to power in 2007, having served as Minister for Veterans Affairs and Defense Science and Personnel, and then Minister for the Environment during the Keating government. Former ALP Leader and Defense Minister Kim Beazley phoned Faulkner five times, urging him to put his hand up for the job. Faulkner concedes he has a "steep learning curve" but is widely viewed as more capable than his predecessor. He is expected to attend the NATO Defense Ministerial meeting in Brussels June 11-12. END SUMMARY.

ANNOUNCEMENT

12. (SBU) On June 5, the day after Fitzgibbon resigned, Rudd announced Senator John Faulkner as the new Defense Minister. Rudd said Faulkner had "unquestionable integrity and strength of character". As late as two hours prior to the announcement, there was media speculation Faulkner didn't want the job. Faulkner revealed at the press conference that former ALP Leader and Defense Minister Kim Beazley had phoned him five times, urging him to throw his hat in the ring, lending credence to the speculation, and that he had phoned Beazley's successor as Defense Minister, Robert Ray, for advice. Faulkner conceded he had a "steep learning curve," accepting the job in the wake of a major transformation of

the Australian Department of Defence outlined in the Rudd government's recent Defence White Paper. Prior to the announcement, former Defense analyst Hugh White (a former adviser to Beazley and Prime Minister Bob Hawke, and former senior Defense bureaucrat) declared Faulkner would be "an outstanding defense minister" and that his "manner and style" would suit the role. Faulkner remarked: "I'll have very high expectations of the Department of Defense as its new minister." Faulkner is expected to attend a NATO meeting next week which will discuss Australia's commitment in Afghanistan.

WHO IS FAULKNER?

13. (SBU) Faulkner was among a very few ALP MPs to have had Cabinet experience when the ALP returned to office in November 2007, having served as Minister for Veterans Affairs and Minister for Defense Science and Personnel in 1993, and Qand Minister for Defense Science and Personnel in 1993, and then Minister for the Environment, Sport and Territories in the Keating ALP government (a Cabinet position) in 1994. As Leader of the Opposition ALP in the Senate during 1998-2004, Faulkner was well known for his attention to detail and focus on government accountability, particularly during Senate inquiries. Faulkner is from the New South Wales Left faction of the ALP. In the 1980s, he was arguably its most powerful powerbroker, serving as NSW ALP Assistant General Secretary 1980-89. In 1989, he entered the Senate following the retirement of Arthur Gietzelt. Since then, Faulkner has become more pragmatic and gradually divorced himself from factional warfare. Widely viewed as honest and a straight shooter, he is looked upon by many in the ALP as an elder statesman whose advice is taken very seriously. He has been a key figure in ALP leadership ballots and election campaigns during the last decade. Rudd holds him in the highest

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regard. One powerful figure in the ALP Left told us Faulkner is part of Rudd's "inner circle" when government political strategy is discussed.

BIOGRAPHIC DETAILS

14. (U) John Philip Faulkner was born in Leeton, New South Wales (NSW), on April 12, 1954, and lived most of his life in Sydney, where he attended public schools and graduated from Macquarie University with an arts degree and education diploma. He joined the Labor Party as a teenager and held various party positions, including member of the NSW Administrative Committee (1978-1989), Assistant General Secretary, NWS Branch of the ALP (1980-1989); delegate, NSW Annual Conference (since 1975); delegate to the national Conference (since 1982); and member of the APL National Executive (since 1989.) For four years, Faulkner worked as a specialist teacher of children with severe disabilities and then worked as a research officer for the NSW Minister for Sport and Recreation. He was appointed to the Australian Senate on April 4, 1989, to fill the vacancy created by the retirement of Senator Arthur Gietzelt, and was elected for further six-year terms in 1993, 1998 and 2004. After the 1996 Federal election, he became Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and Shadow Minister for Social Security (March 1996-March 1997.) He was then appointed Shadow Minister for Public Administration and Government Services (March 1997 - 2001.) Senator Faulkner also became Shadow Minister with responsibility for Territories (i.e., Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory) during October 1997 - October 1998.)

15. (U) After the 1998 Federal election, Senator Faulkner remained Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and assumed the portfolios of Shadow Minister for Public Administration and Government Services, and Shadow Minister for Olympic Coordination and the Centenary of the Federation. He remained as Leader of the Opposition in the Senate after the 2001 Federal election. In the 2001-2004 Parliamentary term, Faulkner held several portfolios, including Shadow Minister

of State, Shadow Minister for Public Administration and Accountability, and Shadow Minister for Home Affairs. After the 2004 election he stood down as Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, serving as National President of the Australian Labor Party from April 2007 to March 2008. Under the Rudd Government, Faulkner was appointed Special Minister of State, Cabinet Secretary and Vice-President of the Executive Council.

¶6. (C/NF) Faulkner is reputedly very protective of his home life, and personal details are noticeably absent from available official biographic material. The 2002 Australian Political Almanac notes he "has two teenage children from a former marriage." A November 7, 2006, Australian newspaper story identified NSW Tourism Minister, Sandra Nori, as Faulkner's former wife in an article alleging she had had an affair with NSW MP Paul Gibson while she was married.

GOOD CHOICE

¶7. (C/NF) COMMENT: Faulkner is widely regarded as a safe pair of hands and we anticipate a good working relationship based on our contacts with him. The government remains committed to the Defense reform program driven by Fitzgibbon, which means Faulkner may continue to face resistance from vested interests in the defense bureaucracy. However, given his temperment and reputation, we believe Faulkner will have a greater chance of pushing the reform agenda through would Fitzgibbon. He has better political instincts, superior knowledge of the process of government process and commands more respect. Faulkner's commitment to probity will lessen the likelihood that he will become embroiled in the

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controversies that plagued Fitzgibbon's tenure.

¶8. (C/NF) During meetings with Ambassador McCallum in 2008, Faulkner seemed disengaged from the central issues facing the government at that time, and instead was more focused on Parliamentary issues. However, we expect him to quickly get up to speed on his new portfolio.

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